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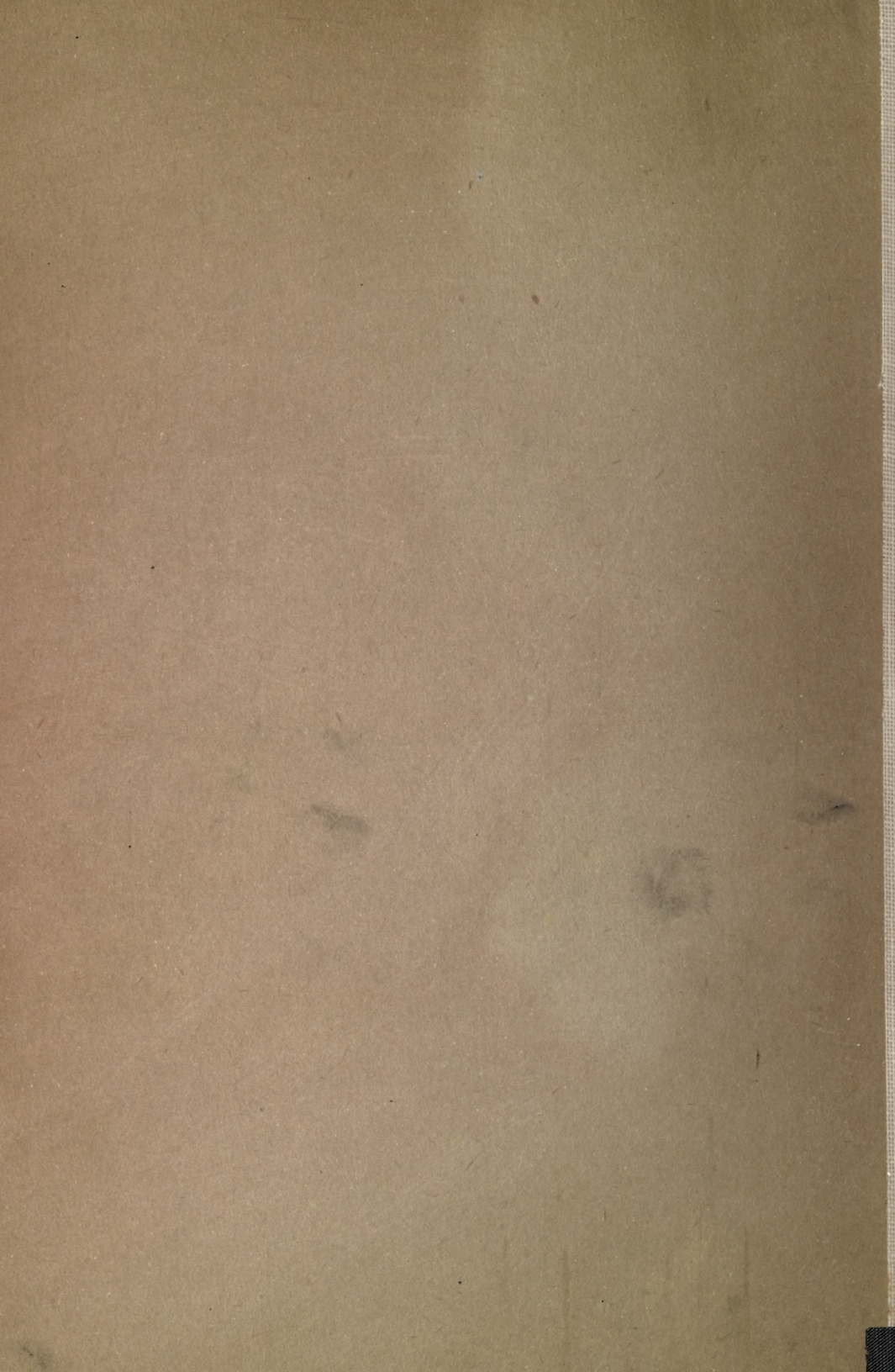
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THE ROMANES LECTURE

1918

*Some Aspects of  
The Victorian Age*

BY

THE RIGHT HON. H. H. ASQUITH

DELIVERED

IN THE SHELDONIAN THEATRE

JUNE 8, 1918

*Price Two Shillings net*

OXFORD

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## SOME ASPECTS OF THE VICTORIAN AGE

It is a curious fact in English history that the only Sovereigns who have given their names to an epoch have been three reigning Queens. No one talks of the Age of Edward I, or of Henry VIII, or of George III, though their reigns were all times of great national movement, both in the sphere of action and in the sphere of thought. But the Age of Elizabeth, and the Age of Queen Anne, have passed into the conventional dialect of chronology: and although it is less than twenty years since the death of Queen Victoria, we can feel little doubt that, for generations to come, the historian will speak of the Victorian Age.

If we use the term Age, as we do in this context, in the sense of a particular and defined phase in the development of the nation, its boundaries obviously cannot be measured with the precision of an astronomical calendar. Both the Age of Elizabeth and the Age of Anne survived in point of time the monarchs who have given them their name. Shakespeare and Bacon—the two Elizabethan giants—produced their richest and most memorable work after the accession of James I. The achievements of the three greatest Englishmen in the reign of Anne (as great in their several departments as perhaps any three in English history), Newton, Marlborough, and Wren, were practi-

cally completed before the Queen's death ; but Pope, Bolingbroke, Addison, and not a few others, continued to preserve the traditions of the Age of Anne, projecting like a salient into the dull prosaic levels of the early Hanoverian era.

On the other hand, that which we roughly call the Victorian Age, in those of its features which will give it a characteristic and individual place in history, was over some time—a decade at least—before the end of the great Queen's reign. Not only had its dominating personalities, with one or two exceptions, disappeared ; but the transformation, subtle, at first almost imperceptible, of which we are still witnessing the development, had already set in ; and a new chapter (perhaps one might say a new volume) had been opened in the story of our national life.

It is of some aspects of the Victorian Age—in this limited sense—that I propose to speak to-day. I say purposely of '*some* aspects' ; for not only would anything in the nature of an exhaustive review be impossible within the confines of an hour, but the terms of the Trust under which this Lecture is given exclude by implication from permissible subjects the two great controversial domains of politics and theology ; each of which absorbed a large part of the energies of the Victorians, great and small ; and which together will supply—unless and until the current estimates of what is relatively important in the life of communities are revised—the most copious material to the future historian of the time.

Within the area as so circumscribed, the first and most obvious thing to arrest the attention, in any survey



of the Victorian Age, is the almost paradoxical incongruity between what may be broadly termed its outward and its inward life. To the theorists (if there are any left), as to the conditions which favour the efflorescence of creative genius, it presents one of the most baffling of problems. It was an era when England was ruled by the middle class, who lived and moved, for the most part—and quite contentedly—in unpicturesque and uninspiring surroundings. Even the ‘growing pains’ of what we call democracy were hardly beginning to be felt. The ‘red fool-fury of the Seine’, at which Tennyson scoffed, was regarded as a thing only fit for foreigners. The country (except for the Crimean War) was at peace with all Europe; and the Victorians, though not so insular in their habits of mind and feeling as they are sometimes represented, and warmed from time to time with a genuine sympathy for what one of their great orators once described as ‘nationalities rightly struggling to be free’, were not a race of knights errant. They concentrated their main efforts upon the improvement of the mechanism of industry and communication, and upon the attainment of the commercial and financial primacy of the world. It is not fair to say that they were wholly wrapped up in Materialism, and the pursuit of wealth and comfort. But it took a great deal to make them realize—as, thanks to Lord Shaftesbury and his free-lance allies, Carlyle and Dickens, they came to realize—that they might be paying too high a price for capturing the markets of the world in a system of production which crippled and stunted and decimated the women and children of the country. They continued to the end

to think that the ideal to be set before any workman, of more than average capacity and ambition, was that he might in time rise from his own class, and become an employer of workmen himself. On the whole, the general attitude of mind was one of contentment, or at the lowest of acquiescence, which at times took the more challenging note of an almost strident self-complacency: such as is sounded in those famous speeches of Mr. Lowe in 1866-7, which formed one of the favourite texts of Matthew Arnold's *Epistles to the Philistines*.

Such, in broad outline, was the outside atmosphere, in which the intellectual soil, with a fecundity which hardly failed for forty years, produced, in almost unrivalled profusion, the masterpieces of the Victorian Age. Nothing can be more striking, or more unaccountable upon any abstract theory, than the copiousness and the variety of its Personal resources. In a recently published volume—the most trenchant and brilliant series of biographical and historical studies which I have read for a long time—Mr. Lytton Strachey, under the modest title '*Eminent Victorians*',<sup>1</sup> has put on his canvas four figures (as unlike one another as any four people could be), Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Dr. Arnold, and General Gordon. None of the four can be said to have contributed much of permanent importance to the literature or art or science of their time; but each of them, in his or her day, was a prominent and potent personality; and perhaps one may be allowed to say that they are in less danger than

<sup>1</sup> '*Eminent Victorians*,' by Lytton Strachey (Chatto and Windus, 1918).



ever of being forgotten, now that they have been re-created for the English readers of the future (not in a spirit of blind hero-worship) by Mr. Strachey's subtle and suggestive art. But men and women of action tend to gravitate in the direction either of politics or religion; the two fields which are fenced off from us here to-day. So let me for the moment leave them out of the account.

In the intellectual sphere it will be found that most of the great names of the Victorian Age are those of men and women born in the ten years between 1809 and 1819. Carlyle, Macaulay, Disraeli, J. S. Mill are all a little earlier, and Herbert Spencer, Matthew Arnold, Millais, George Meredith a little later. But the Calendar of those ten years is worth recounting:

In 1809 Darwin, Gladstone, Tennyson.<sup>1</sup>

„ 1811 Thackeray.

„ 1812 Dickens, Robert Browning.

„ 1816 Charlotte Brontë.

„ 1819 (the birth year of Queen Victoria herself)

George Eliot, Charles Kingsley, Ruskin.

I have included Disraeli and Gladstone not because, but in spite, of their being politicians.

At the Queen's accession the eldest of these was twenty-eight and the youngest eighteen. That year (1837)—the opening scene of the Victorian Drama—fitly heralded the future; for in it were given to the English world two immortal works, opposite as the poles in character, but each disclosing for the first time the real genius of its author: Dickens's 'Pickwick Papers', and Carlyle's 'French Revolution'. During the decade

<sup>1</sup> In America, Lincoln and Poe.

which followed our literature was enriched by 'Vanity Fair', 'Jane Eyre', the first volume of 'Modern Painters', and the first two volumes of Macaulay's 'History'.

A distinguished man, happily still amongst us, who was born near the beginning of the Queen's reign, and was later on an ornament both of the forensic and the political world—Sir Edward Clarke—has recently produced an interesting autobiography.<sup>1</sup> He did not, in his formative years, enjoy the advantages—perhaps in these days one ought to add, or suffer from the drawbacks—of a Public School and University Education. He was to a large extent his own teacher, and was a voracious reader, especially of contemporary English. He gives us a list, year by year, of the books which appeared during his boyhood from 1850 to 1859: perhaps, in the department of Literature, the most fruitful decade in the whole Victorian era.

I will not go through his catalogue, which every one should read and study; but I will take two or three years as samples, sometimes omitting one or two of Sir E. Clarke's specimens, and sometimes adding one or two, for which he has not found a place.

Take first 1850—the year of 'Pendennis', 'In Memoriam', and 'Christmas Eve and Easter Day'. Or again, 1855, with 'Maud', 'Men and Women', 'The Virginians', Macaulay's third and fourth volumes, and Herbert Spencer's 'Psychology'. Or, lastly, 1859, with the 'Idylls of the King', 'Adam Bede', 'The Tale of Two Cities', 'The Ordeal of Richard Feverel', Edward Fitzgerald's 'Rubaiyât', and (in some ways the most

<sup>1</sup> 'Memories of my Life,' by Sir Edward Clarke (Murray, 1918).



epoch-making of them all) Darwin's 'Origin of Species'. Even this marvellous and almost unexampled array gives an inadequate idea of the resources of Victorian genius when the Age was at its zenith. For, within the same ten years, we have the first published poems of Matthew Arnold and William Morris, Ruskin's 'Stones of Venice', the first novel of Anthony Trollope, Mrs. Gaskell's 'Cranford', Mill's 'Liberty', and the best work of Charles Kingsley. Kingsley, by the way, at the close of the decade, was on the eve of the ill-advised adventure which, to the lasting benefit of all lovers of the purest and finest English prose, was the occasion for the appearance in 1864 of Newman's 'Apologia'. The stream, if never afterwards quite so full and strong, did not dry up; it was for years later being constantly reinforced and vitalized by new tributaries, down to the very confines of the Victorian Age.

The wind blows where it lists: and no theory of causation with which I am acquainted—whether of heredity, or environment, or of any combination or permutation of possible or imaginable antecedents—can adequately account for these indisputable facts. It is right, moreover, to record, that the Victorian public, the men in the street at whom Matthew Arnold giped, the subscribers to the circulating libraries, which then went far to make or unmake the fortunes of an author, were neither unappreciative, nor exclusive in their appreciations. It is true that the two greatest of the women writers of the age—Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot—were, at the outset of their careers, roughly handled by the orthodox and fashionable critics. But both came very soon into their own. In the case of another pair of

the most gifted authors of the time, Robert Browning and George Meredith, each of whom had to wait before he could make good his claims to pass, from the worship of a coterie, into the recognized Pantheon, the fault lay, perhaps, as much with the perversity of the writer as with the dullness of the public. Mr. Chesterton in his suggestive little book ('The Victorian Age in Literature'<sup>1</sup>) says of Browning—and I respectfully agree with him—that it is not true that he was careless of form or style. Still less (I think) is it true of Meredith. Mr. Herbert Paul, in a charming Essay on The Victorian Novel,<sup>2</sup> cites a journalist of the day who was allowed by his editor to assert that the "Amazing Marriage" was by no means devoid of interest, but it was a pity that Mr. Meredith could not manage to write like other people': a remark which, now that Meredith has become, *malgré lui*, the founder of a cult, will seem to his votaries the last word of Victorian Philistinism. The real criticism of both Browning and Meredith in this respect would seem to be that, having a rare, if not unique, command of the resources of language, they became, by choice or by caprice, experimentalists—one might almost say adventurers—in the art of expression. They teased their contemporaries; and perhaps they have impaired their chances with posterity (as Sir Joshua Reynolds is said to have done through resorting, in the later stages of his career, to strange pigments of his own invention) by doing a certain violence to the medium in which they worked. But there is no instance (so far as we know) among the

<sup>1</sup> 'The Victorian Age in Literature,' by G. K. Chesterton (Home University Library, Williams and Norgate).

<sup>2</sup> 'Men and Letters,' by Herbert Paul (John Lane, 1901).



Victorians of the premature cutting off, by public neglect or critical vituperation, of some 'inheritor of unfulfilled renown'—such as was the actual case of Chatterton, or the legendary case of Keats.

Of the imaginative writers of the Victorian Age, the Poets and the Novelists, it would be impossible to say too much, and difficult to say anything that has not been better said before. If we want to measure the sum of our total indebtedness to them, we have only to try and realize how much the thoughts and the modes of speech of the average man, throughout the English-speaking world, have been and are unconsciously coloured by their creations and inventions. Great as were Browning and Tennyson, it is the Novelists rather than the Poets who have left the deepest imprint on popular imagination and popular speech. It may be true that none of them had Scott's width of range, or Jane Austen's fine, sure touch; but with the names that I have already enumerated on our lips we may safely challenge the world to produce any other epoch in which this form of creative art has displayed the same exuberance of wealth and variety. Macaulay had a weakness, which, perhaps, we may say here he carried with him from Cambridge, for arranging the subjects of his admiration—great men, great books, great cities, great pictures, great poems and histories—in an imaginary order of merit. He says, for example, somewhere in his letters, that he puts Cicero (of whom he was a devoted and life-long reader) 'at the head of the minds of the second order': not quite a Wrangler (as it were), but a good Senior Optime. It used to be a favourite critical exercise among less eminent Victorians than

Macaulay to discuss which was the greater writer—Dickens or Thackeray? Tennyson or Browning? Charlotte Brontë or George Eliot? I think we are all agreed now that comparisons of this kind are, if not futile, at least unprofitable. Men and women of creative genius cannot be labelled and classified, like plants or politicians. Nor do the masterpieces of Victorian fiction, either separately or collectively, belong to any of the recognized schools. As Mr. Chesterton has well pointed out, Dickens and Thackeray combine, each after his own artistic method, both Realism and Romance.

Let me, before I turn to another branch of my topic, say a word more of one whom I mentioned a few moments ago—Charles Kingsley. The great Mirabeau said of his younger brother, who went by the nickname of 'Barrel' Mirabeau: 'In any other family than ours he would be regarded as a scapegrace and a wit.' So, perhaps, if he were not overshadowed by his mightier contemporaries, Charles Kingsley would to-day have a greater reputation both as novelist and poet. Much of his fiction (like some of Mrs. Gaskell's and Disraeli's) is too deeply immersed in the local and passing conditions of Victorian life to be readable now. But he had remarkable powers both of perception and description. In poetry, he has left two or three lyrics which are worthy (and this is high praise) to be placed side by side with Tennyson's best. And in the supremely difficult art of writing for Children, which requires, in addition to command over the unexpected and the picturesque, the power of mixing good sense with good nonsense, and letting the one glide imperceptibly into the other, he has not been surpassed; except perhaps by his Victorian



contemporary, whom we here in Oxford claim as especially our own, Lewis Carroll.

I have said or implied that the note of revolt is not characteristic of the Victorian Age. But the Victorians were not allowed to wax fat, and to bask in the sunshine of their prosperity and content, without reproof, exhortation, and even denunciation. The prophetic office has rarely in history been better filled or more faithfully exercised. Carlyle taught his contemporaries, time after time (as on a famous occasion Gideon taught the men of Succoth), with 'thorns of the wilderness and briers'.<sup>1</sup> Ruskin—a literary portent, if there ever was one, without pedigree or posterity, as perfect an artist in words at twenty-one as at any stage of his career—was moved by the tragic contrasts and failures of the Victorian civilization (as he saw it), to turn aside from the glad tidings of the gospel of Beauty, which he had preached with an incomparable wealth of eloquence, insight, and spiritual fervour. He turned aside that he might deliver, with the same faith and even deeper passion, to a perverse generation who had made for themselves false gods, his stern and solemn message of warning and of judgement to come. In 1860, as soon as he had finished the fifth and last volume of 'Modern Painters', he started the publication in the 'Cornhill Magazine' of 'Unto This Last', in which he exposed and denounced the current conceptions of such elementary matters as Wealth and Value. It aroused a tornado of abuse and ridicule from the orthodox economists; 'the world' (wrote one of their organs) 'was not going to be preached to death by a mad governess': and

<sup>1</sup> Judges viii. 16.

even Thackeray himself, and his astute publisher, became so much alarmed that, after three instalments had appeared, they stopped its further publication in their Magazine.<sup>1</sup> Ruskin was always inclined to regard 'Unto This Last' as his highest achievement in point of style, and his judgement is confirmed by two such accomplished critics as Mr. Frederic Harrison and Mr. Mackail. What is more important, he never flinched from his new mission, and continued to the end of his days, with an ever-growing following, not for the sake of destruction only, but of reconstruction also, to bombard the citadel of Victorian Economics. Matthew Arnold, a fine poet and an unsurpassed literary critic, also became one of the Prophets. What drove him into the pulpit was, not so much moral resentment at the social paradoxes of his time, as intellectual irritation and impatience at the stupidity and sterility of contemporary life. The whole community—upper, middle, and lower classes—Barbarians, Philistines, Populace—seemed to him to be equally wanting in the 'one thing needful'. But the Philistine *bourgeoisie* became his favourite target, with their narrow intellectual and spiritual outlook, their barren daily treadmill of routine, their absorption in superficial goods, their smug and sordid self-complacency. He might have taken as his text a pregnant sentence which is to be found in one of Bishop Butler's Sermons: unfortunately (as I think), though Arnold was not without the traditional Oxford regard for Butler, his favourite episcopal writer was Bishop Wilson—a man of a very different stamp. 'It is

<sup>1</sup> The whole story is well told in Cook's 'Life of Ruskin', vol. ii, ch. i.



as easy', says Butler, 'to close the eyes of the mind as those of the body.'<sup>1</sup> And in Arnold's view the one thing needful to humanize and vitalize this stolid visionless mass was what he called Culture.<sup>2</sup> Culture (as he conceives it) consists in the possession within of a perennial source of Sweetness and Light—an unhappy phrase which he borrowed from Swift, and which became perhaps his most irritating catchword—and manifests itself in a balance of interests, a catholic sympathy, a due sense of relative values, a wide outlook upon life. If Carlyle and Ruskin scourged and lashed their generation with briers and scorpions, Matthew Arnold may be said to have harassed and pricked it with a well-burnished stiletto. Let me add to this *catena* of prophetic literature a further notable contribution, the 'Essay on Compromise', by John Morley, which appeared in the early seventies. From a quite different point of view, and with methods of thinking and style which were both new and singularly impressive, it is a ruthless unveiling of some characteristic Victorian insincerities. Exposed to the varied methods of these preachers of genius, the Victorians had no excuse if they continued in a state of spiritual torpor.

The number of people who really think in any age and country is very limited, and still smaller is the number of those who think for themselves. Socrates found it to be so in the highly intelligent and favoured community in which he was such a disturbing element.

<sup>1</sup> Butler's Sermons : Sermon X, 'Upon Self-Deceit.'

<sup>2</sup> 'Culture and Anarchy' (Smith, Elder and Co., 1869). The motto is: *Estote ergo vos perfecti*.

It is certainly not easy to say how far the philosophic developments, which went on in England during the Victorian Age, tinged or biased the thoughts of the average man. I may say nothing to-day about the religious aspect of the matter. The rise and fall of Tractarianism; the fears and the hopes aroused by the Roman Catholic propaganda and the so-called Papal Aggression; the powerful influence of that remarkable set of personalities who were rather crudely grouped as the 'Broad Church'; the sway of the Preachers, such as Robertson at one extreme, and Spurgeon at the other (for the Victorians were a Church-going and Chapel-going people): all these are topics which an historian of the Age will have to sort into their due proportions and perspective.

We are free, however, to indicate the general speculative tendencies which were at work, and, incidentally, to form a rough estimate of their place in the history of Thought. During the first twenty-five years of the Queen's reign, Utilitarianism (to borrow an apt phrase from Mr. Chesterton) was the 'philosophy in office'—Utilitarianism, not in the crude and aggressive dogmatic setting of Bentham and the elder Mill, but with its rough edges smoothed, its corners rounded, and its Hedonism refined and sublimated, by John Stuart Mill. The younger Mill may, indeed, be styled Purveyor-general of Thought for the early Victorians. He supplied their men of science with Logic, and their men of business with Political Economy; and such men of pure thought as there were, for the most part, sat for a generation at his feet. Even when I came up to Oxford in 1870 his influence was still predominant,



though it was being sapped and slowly undermined. The invaders came from two very different camps—one set, in the guise of allies who claimed that their weapons were better up to date; the other set breathing open defiance, and bent upon conquest and annexation. The former arrayed themselves under the banner of Herbert Spencer, one of the notable men of the Age, who devoted himself to the things of the Intellect with a single-mindedness, and an indifference to the world, the flesh, and the devil, which recall the lives of the early Renaissance scholars. After an unconventional and fragmentary education, he began active life at the age of seventeen in the first year of the Queen's reign as a railway engineer.<sup>1</sup> By sheer force of intellect and character, incredible industry, magnificent intrepidity, and, one must add, colossal self-confidence, he was able, before he was forty, to conceive and draw up, in prospectus form, a scheme of Synthetic Philosophy, which for range of compass is bold to the limits of audacity, and to the working out of which he devoted all the remainder of a long and strenuous life. I will reserve anything that I have to say of him and his associates, the Evolutionists, until we come later on to a still greater name—that of Charles Darwin.

The open assault upon the fashionable cult of Mill came (as I have said) from a different camp, and had its head-quarters here in Oxford. I leave on one side (for it was a mere episode) the rather dreary dialectical campaign, in the fifties and the early sixties, over the Limits of the Knowable, in which Hamilton and

<sup>1</sup> 'An Autobiography,' by Herbert Spencer (Williams and Norgate, 1904).

Mansel and Mill himself spilt Dead Seas of ink.<sup>1</sup> Even in my undergraduate days it was almost as obsolete as the Bangorian Controversy of the reign of Queen Anne; and it is only remembered now, if it is remembered at all, for Mill's famous declaration as to the conditions under which he, the most impeccable of mankind, was prepared to go to Hell. The protagonists of the Idealistic revolt, or reaction—whichever it is to be called—T. H. Green and Edward Caird, were both nurtured at Balliol in the days of Jowett's ascendancy.

Jowett was the most unselfish and devoted of College tutors, and one of the rarest mixtures ever seen of worldly and unworldly wisdom. He was also a well furnished philosopher, and had made himself familiar, in the intervals of lecturing upon and translating the masterpieces of antiquity, with the successors of Kant—Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and the rest. In the exploration of that difficult and dimly lighted territory, where it is often not easy to see the wood for the trees or the trees for the wood, he was, among Englishmen, one of the pioneers. It was not the kind of place to provide a permanent home for his fastidious and eclectic mind, and when Green, who had followed him, came back full of enthusiasm from his quest, Jowett '*avait déjà passé par là*'. Green was a man of

<sup>1</sup> There is a lively summary of this business in a contemporary letter of that fine and subtle thinker, Henry Sidgwick. See 'Henry Sidgwick: A Memoir' (Macmillan, 1906), pp. 129-130. Sidgwick adds: 'John Grote is going to bring out a book. Rough Thoughts on something he calls it: they are sure to be rough, and sure to be thoughts.' This was J. Grote's 'Exploratio Philosophica' (1865): a most remarkable fragment.



a very different type. A certain Puritan austerity and fervour streaked his intellect, as it dominated his life. He was no mere borrower of other men's ideas and systems. Indeed, both in his methods of thinking and his style of expression he had an almost angular individuality, which perhaps made him a less effective propagandist outside than his more fluent and facile fellow thinker, Edward Caird. But in teaching authority—in controlling and moulding influence over the ductile academic material—he was among the most potent of the Victorians.

I shall not trace the development of the struggle; still less pronounce any judgement upon its final issue. That would carry us well over the Victorian boundary. But I may quote the contemporary opinion of a great Oxford pundit of those days, who had long since ceased to have (in any dogmatic sense) opinions of his own—Mark Pattison. Pattison was a man of deep and wide erudition, who had been disappointed in life, and whose output, in volume at any rate, was far below his powers. Words which were written in a mood of candid friendship by one of the early Italian Humanists to another, might perhaps have been addressed to him: '*Melius erat non tantum sapere quantum sapis.*'<sup>1</sup> In my time he was a dim, remote figure, passing his days, as Rector of Lincoln, in Llama-like seclusion, and (as was currently believed) in the company of the ghosts of Scaliger and Casaubon and F. A. Wolf. He had sowed his intellectual wild oats among the Tractarians thirty years before. Indeed, he spent something like seven or eight of the best years of his youth, under the

<sup>1</sup> See Sir J. E. Sandys's 'Harvard Lectures' (Cambridge, 1905), p. 44, n.

guidance of Newman, in grazing among the Fathers, whom (after his eyes had been opened) he characterized as 'the degenerate and semi-barbarous Christian writers of the Fourth Century'. And now, in his emancipated isolation, he looked more in pity than in anger upon what he regarded as the apostasy of Green. 'A new *à priori* metaphysic', he writes, 'was imported into Oxford by a staunch Liberal. It can only be accounted for by a certain puzzle-headedness on the part of the Professor, who was removed from the scene before he had time to see how eagerly the Tories began to carry off his honey to their hive.'<sup>1</sup> (To avoid possible misapprehensions I ought perhaps to explain that, in the Llama dialect, 'Liberal' means 'Rationalist', and 'Tory' means 'High Churchman'.)

I have not space to follow the Victorians into some of their other spheres of achievement and effort. In the domain of History, the names of Froude and Freeman became symbols and watchwords in the rather unreal battle on the issue whether it is possible for a great historian to be both accurate and readable. In point of fact, Froude was capable of an infinity of dryas dust research, and Freeman of not a little rugged and sometimes flashy rhetoric. The matter had been settled many centuries ago by Thucydides, and the combatants had another example before their eyes, or at least fresh in their memory. Macaulay—as we know from Sir G. Trevelyan's Life, the most brilliant of the Victorian biographies—thought no labour wasted in writing history, whether it was spent on verifying a fact, or perfecting a sentence.

On the Art of the Victorians—a difficult and much

<sup>1</sup> 'Memoirs,' by Mark Pattison (Macmillan, 1885), p. 167.



controverted topic—I will venture only a word. Turner can hardly be said to belong to them : but an Age which produced Millais and the Pre-Raphaelites and Watts, and in a later generation Frederick Walker and Cecil Lawson, can never (to put it at the lowest) be treated as a barren interlude in the annals of the English School of Painting.

I have left to the last a department in which the pre-eminence of the Victorians can hardly be challenged. Faraday, Joule, Kelvin, Lyell are four of the most illustrious names on the roll of English science. The researches of the first three in Chemistry and Physics have not only added enormously to the exactness and the amplitude of those sciences, but were the source and the condition of the vast developments in mechanics, and the application of electricity, which have transformed the face of the world and the habits of mankind. A catalogue of the great Victorian men of Science, and of their achievements, would include W. K. Clifford and F. M. Balfour: whose early deaths were declared by Huxley to be the greatest loss in his time to that department of Thought, not only in England but in the world.

If not actually the most important, certainly the most interesting, intellectual event in the Age was the appearance of Darwin's 'Origin of Species' in 1859. There was nothing new in the conception of Evolution : it had a pedigree which stretched down from Heraclitus to Lamarck. It had even in certain of its aspects been popularized in Great Britain in a once famous book—the 'Vestiges of Creation'—which between 1844, when it was first published, and 1853, ran through nine

large editions.<sup>1</sup> But the great fence—the supposed immutability of species in the sphere of organic life—had still to be taken, and it is one of the singular so-called coincidences, of which there are many in the history of thought, that the road was being contemporaneously and independently explored in the first twenty years of the Victorian age by two Englishmen, Darwin and Wallace. Nothing can be finer or nobler than the relations which these two great men preserved to one another: it is one of the most honourable chapters in the annals of Science.

Darwin assumes three conditions without attempting to account for them—heredity, variation, overcrowding. He uses the phrase 'Natural Selection' to describe the process by which the fortunate possessors of a new and aggressively useful variation were able to oust their old-fashioned, unvaried, conservative competitors. The phrase which describes the conditions under which Natural Selection comes into play—the 'struggle for existence'—is, I believe, due to Wallace; and the phrase which describes the final result—the 'survival of the fittest'—to Herbert Spencer. The last turned out, perhaps, to be the unluckiest formula of the three (although all have given rise to misunderstanding), because as Huxley, after thirty years' experience, pointed out in his Romanes Lecture here<sup>2</sup> in 1894, the term 'fittest' has, or is capable of having, a 'moral flavour'; while the only 'fitness' that is relevant to the argument is fitness having regard to the

<sup>1</sup> See Merz, 'History of European Thought in the Nineteenth Century' (Blackwood, 1912), vol. ii, p. 318.

<sup>2</sup> 'Evolution and Ethics' ('Collected Essays', vol. ix, p. 80).



external conditions which for the time being prevail. I need hardly reassure those of you who are beginning to be anxious by saying that I am not going to touch even the fringe of the controversy as it presents itself to Biologists. I am not qualified to enter the outer court of the Temple of Science. I am interested in it to-day only in so far as it affected men and ideas in the Victorian Age.

There can be no question as to the extent and the depth of the interest which was aroused. There had been nothing like it since the accession of the Queen. The Scientific Camp was divided: the veteran Owen resolutely hostile, Lyell not wholly convinced, and the younger spirits, the men of the future, headed by Huxley—one of the few men of whom it can be doubted whether he had a finer faculty for Science or for Letters—full of enthusiastic faith. By some of them Darwin was hailed as a second Newton; and years afterwards, Mr. Romanes, the founder of this Lecture, and himself an accomplished biologist, went so far as to write: 'If we may estimate the importance of an idea by the change of thought which it effects, this idea of natural selection is unquestionably the most important idea that has ever been conceived by the mind of man.'<sup>1</sup>

There was another camp that was equally disturbed. The demonstration of the mutability of species, with its possible, perhaps its necessary, corollary, that the human race had been physically developed from some lower form of organism, seemed to many excellent people to be a death-blow, not only to Revelation, but to all

<sup>1</sup> 'Darwin, and after Darwin,' vol. i, p. 257 (quoted by Merz, l. c., p. 346, n.).

the higher and more spiritual conceptions of man's nature and functions. The lead in this sense was at once taken by a picturesque and interesting personage—the then Bishop of Oxford, Samuel Wilberforce. This is the last place in the world where he needs a re-introduction. But one or two things may be said about him. He was in his day the foremost member of his own profession: by general consent the most effective preacher, by universal consent the greatest Bishop, in the Church of England. Through a curious malignity in the chapter of accidents, he just missed both Primacies, first that of York, and then that of Canterbury. Outside the ecclesiastical fold, he was in the House of Lords and on the platform one of the first orators in a time of great speakers: nor was he surpassed by any of his contemporaries in attractive social gifts. His more than Pauline capacity of being all things to all men gained him an undeserved reputation for time-serving, and even for insincerity. He had a whole-hearted belief in the Anglican position. In the field of action he was a wary and resourceful, and therefore a formidable, strategist.

Among other accomplishments the Bishop, who loved country life, had a good outside knowledge of Natural History, and after a little coaching from Owen, the *doyen* of British Biologists, he set to work to demolish Darwin in an article in the 'Quarterly Review'. He thought to pursue his advantage at the meeting of the British Association which was held here in Oxford in 1860, where, however, in his own chosen arena, Huxley, the young gladiator of Evolution—he was then only thirty-five—gave him a nasty fall.



Of another and a still more interesting incident in the campaign Oxford was again the scene. It was in the autumn of 1864. A meeting was to be held under the presidency of the Bishop in this very Theatre where we are assembled to-day. Its ostensible purpose was to advocate the claims of a Society for endowing Small Livings. Some weeks before the Bishop had invited the attendance of Mr. Disraeli—then leader of the Opposition in the House of Commons—in the character of an eminent layman of the Diocese. The appointed day (it was in the month of November) arrived: the Theatre was packed: the Bishop was in the Chair. Mr. Disraeli, attired (as we are told) in a black velvet jacket and a light-coloured waistcoat, with a billycock hat in his hands, sauntered in, as if he were paying a surprise visit to a Farmers' Ordinary. At the request of the Chairman, he got on his feet, and proceeded to deliver, with that superb nonchalance in which he was unrivalled among the orators of his day, one of his most carefully prepared and most effective speeches. Indeed among all his speeches, leaving aside his prolonged duel with Sir Robert Peel in the forties, I myself should select it as the one which best displays his characteristic powers, and their equally characteristic limitations: irony, invective, boundless audacity of thought and phrase, the thrill or the shock when least expected, a brooding impression of something which is neither exactly sentiment nor exactly imagination but has a touch of both, a glittering rhetoric, constantly hovering over the thin boundary line which divides eloquence and bombast. First he pulverized, to the complete satisfaction of the supporters of better endowed Small Livings,

the Broad Church party of the day and its leaders: Stanley, Jowett, Maurice, and the rest. Then came the magniloquent epigram, 'Man, my Lord, is a being born to believe'. And, finally, he proceeded to dispose of Darwin and his school. 'What', he asked, 'is the question now placed before Society with glib assurance the most astounding? The question is this—Is man an Ape or an Angel? My Lord, I am on the side of the Angels.'<sup>1</sup> There was nothing more to be said. The meeting broke up, their faith reassured, their enthusiasm unrestrained. There had been no victory so complete since 'Coxcombs vanquished Berkeley with a grin'.

It is difficult now to believe, and it had become difficult long before the curtain dropped on the Victorian Age, that the conclusions of Darwin, whether warranted or not by the evidence, should have been supposed to imperil, or even to affect, men's conceptions of the real place of Man in the hierarchy of Nature. Within the technical domain of Biology, it is possible that Darwin raised more questions than he settled. There have been in that area ever since a succession of sects and schisms which almost recall the early centuries of the Christian Church; though, happily or unhappily, the Biologists cannot summon a General Council to define the orthodox faith and to anathematize the heretics.

But in the general sphere of thought, Huxley, the purity of whose Darwinism no one could call in question, put the matter on its right footing in the Romanes

<sup>1</sup> Buckle's 'Life of Disraeli,' vol. iv, p. 370, sq. There is an interesting account of the scene by a non-academic eyewitness in Plowman's 'In the Days of Victoria' (John Lane, 1918), pp. 144-6.



Lecture to which I have already referred. Its real thesis is this : that (assuming the whole Darwinian interpretation of the cosmic chronicle to be true) 'Ethical progress depends not on imitating the cosmic process but on defeating it'. That is a doctrine which can neither be preached to nor practised by man, unless man is a thinking being, looking before and after, not the sport of blind forces, but capable of transcending and dominating them. For this purpose his physical pedigree—whatever it be—is of little moment : whether his origin as animal was a special creation ; or the last stage in development, by this or that evolutionary process, from the lowest forms of organic life ; or even (if that is to any one imaginable) the result of some fortuitous throw of the Dice of Chance. Somewhere and somehow, he has been endowed with something which is to be found nowhere else in the realm of nature ; the power of initiative and self-determination, of conceiving and pursuing ideals ; the capacity to build up an organized communal life, which is not merely cyclical or stereotyped (like that of the ants and the bees and the wolves), but contains within itself the potentiality and the seeds of progress—material, intellectual, spiritual. The last word in this as in some other vital matters is not with the philosophers, or even with the men of science, but with the poet, who has the gift of vision, and can teach us

*plenius ac melius Chrysippo et Crantore.*<sup>1</sup>

'What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hor. 1 Epist. ii. 4.

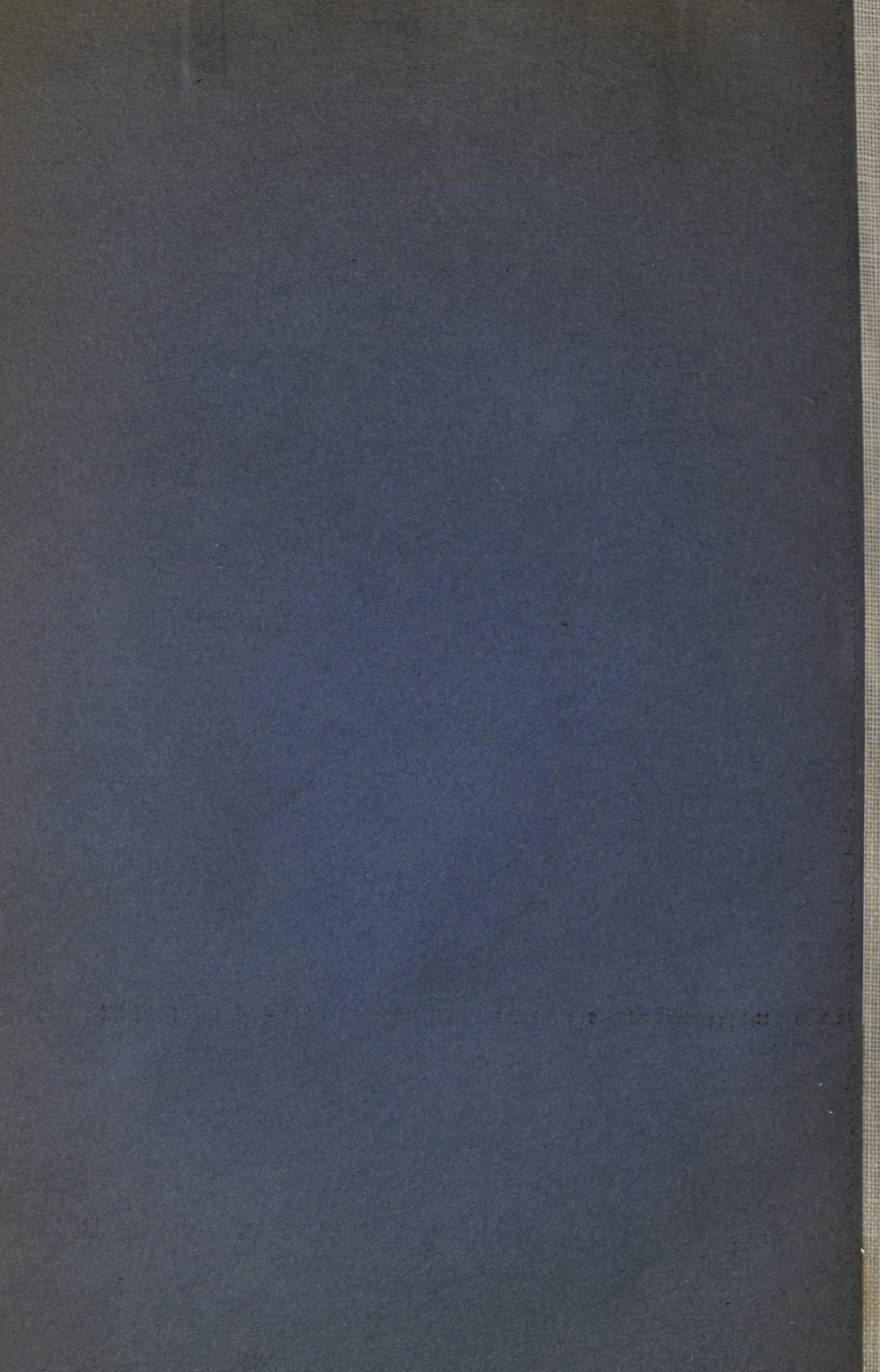
<sup>2</sup> 'Hamlet,' ii. 2.

## 28 SOME ASPECTS OF THE VICTORIAN AGE

I have tried to show you something of the extent and of the splendour of the contribution which the Victorians made to man's common and ever-growing heritage. I can only hope (but with no very robust or confident faith) that some successor of mine, fifty years hence, in this Chair, if he is minded to take a survey from the same outlook of post-Victorian times, may be able to say that their contribution was comparable in the things that permanently enrich and exalt mankind.









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Oxford and Asquith,  
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1st earl of  
Some aspects of the  
Victorian age

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